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EVALUATION OF READING IN THE CLASSROOM. INTERPRETING THE RESULTS OF STANDARDIZED TESTS.

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IF IT IS RECOGNIZED THAT THE SOLE JUSTIFICATION IN GIVING A TEST IS TO OBTAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHILD, FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE CHILD'S PERFORMANCE ON THE TEST MUST BE CONSIDERED IN THE INTERPRETATION OF TEST RESULTS. A SUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT, HIS BACKGROUND, HIS PERCEPTION OF THE TEST SITUATION, AND THE AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS HE BRINGS INTO THE TEST SITUATION WOULD HELP THE TEACHER DIFFERENTIATE AND UNDERSTAND THE CHILD WHO DOES NOT PERFORM BECAUSE HE CANNOT AND THE ONE WHO CAN PERFORM BUT WOULD NOT. THE TEACHER SHOULD CONSIDER EVERY ASPECT OF THE TEST--WHAT IT CAN MEASURE, THE TEST ITEMS THEMSELVES, THE CULTURAL BASIS OF THE TEST, THE KIND OF ENVIRONMENT IT CREATES, THE STATISTICAL ASPECTS, AND HOW THE TEST WOULD CONTRIBUTE TO A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHILD. WHILE CONSIDERING ALL THESE FACTORS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS, THE TEACHER SHOULD REMEMBER TO INTERPRET TO EACH CHILD THE PURPOSE OF THE TEST, WHAT THE TEST SCORES MEAN, AND HOW THESE ARE GOING TO BE USED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (NS)

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EVALUATION OF READING IN THE CLASSROOM
Formal Tools for Evaluating Pupil Performance
"Interpreting the Results of Standardized Tests"

"...Relieve my languish and restore the light"

The preceding quotation reflects, I believe, the feelings of most teachers on each occasion requiring the interpretation of a standardized test. There is no task, save the preparation of grades, which is more painful. There is much languish but little light.

The purpose of this paper is to express some ideas and opinions concerning important, but unheralded, factors which influence performance on standardized tests and therefore must be considered in the interpretation of such test results. Unfortunately, circumstances of time, space, and the limitations of my competencies preclude the restoration of light as a result of this paper; however, perhaps a small spark may be kindled.

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Purposes of Standardized Tests

Standardized tests are most often used by the teacher in order to: (1) obtain information concerning the current status of general development in a particular skill or area, (2) obtain information concerning specific strengths and weaknesses in a particular skill or area, and (3) estimate expected levels of performance or predict particular behaviors.

While the specific purpose of a test may be stated in the title or in the manual, the premise upon which this paper is based is that the sole justification for administering any test is to obtain a deeper and more complete understanding of the child.

General Considerations

Most teachers, through college course work, journal articles, and presentations at conferences and meetings, are aware of general considerations in the selection and use of standardized tests. Such considerations have most often been presented as a set of rhetorical questions concerning reliability, validity, administration, and scoring. In addition, the teacher is provided with a test manual; however, this manual gives little information beyond the statistical data of the test...the portion least understood and consequently least read. While the manual does indicate at which grade level, percentile rank, or stanine a particular child has performed, it offers little else of value for a fair and adequate interpretation of the results.

Such considerations are, of course, important. However, they have been reiterated so often that they approach being trite, and perhaps more important, such criteria are too often emphasized to the exclusion of other equally pertinent criteria.

There is, for example, little in any test manual which aids the teacher in understanding the influence and importance of his role in the testing situation as a factor in the interpretation of the test scores. There is less which provides an understanding of the test and testing environment as a factor in test performance and therefore as a

factor in interpretation of results. And there is practically nothing which provides a basis for the teacher to understand the child and his background and environment as factors in the interpretation of standardized tests.

Factors Related to the Child

It is difficult for many teachers to imagine children coming from environments in which the values, behaviors, and attitudes are not similar to those held by the teacher. The blunt truth, however, is that not every child is from the middle class and all do not enter school ready and eager to learn. Nor does every child perceive the school as the means by which the "good life" can be attained. On the contrary, there are children from families which are openly hostile to the school and the concept of education. There are children from families where there is little intellectual stimulation, little language background, and few experiences which help provide the basis for readiness to learn. There are environments in which children merely exist.

When such learned behaviors as these are transferred to the school environment a child's negative attitudes may very likely be manifested in disinterest, lack of motivation to perform, and even in a readiness to fail. It should be expected, then that in a test situation, this child generally reacts in a manner which inhibits rather than promotes his test performance and consequently such a negative approach invariably results in a poor score, low performance, or failure. Unfortunately for this type of child the most frequent interpretation of his

performance is, "he just doesn't have it," even though his inadequate performance may have absolutely no relation to his ability nor to the amount of knowledge he has assimilated!

Conversely, assume for a moment that this same child with the same score came from an environment which, favorable to the school, was not one in which more than a hint of intellectual stimulation could be provided. Does his score still mean the same as it did previously?

I fear that too many teachers, largely because they have not been provided with the necessary background, make a surface interpretation of a test score and fail to consider whether the child has had ample opportunity to be exposed to the skills or behaviors required of him in the school environment. Many children, for a variety of reasons, have not been exposed to simple tasks and behaviors which we as teachers expect of children. When such a child is required to perform on a test which is designed to evaluate such skills and behaviors, he will perform poorly or not at all. But without sufficient knowledge and information about a child's development and background one cannot know whether the child performed at a low level because he lacked opportunity to learn and therefore had not developed the necessary skills, or whether the child had such opportunity and failed because he lacked the ability to perform, or whether the child had the opportunity and the ability but would not perform. There is a vast difference between the child who does not perform because he can't and the child who can perform but won't.

I wonder, too, how many of us consider the child's perception of

the test situation as a factor in his performance and therefore a necessary factor in the interpretation of the results? We assume that "children take tests in their stride and are not concerned." But is this true? For many children the test is always perceived as as experience filled with frustration and anxiety. On the other hand, there are individuals who possess a considerable amount of "test sophistication" and who perform well under such pressure and anxiety. Yet such factors are rarely, if ever, considered in the interpretation of a test score.

Children must also possess certain skills if they are to be successful on the standardized tests of today. To be sure, the child must possess knowledge, but he must be able to express this knowledge and to do so he must possess certain skills of a physiological nature.

In order to perform adequately on a test, a child must first be able to interpret the directions adequately. He may possess all the knowledge necessary for a high level score on the test, but he must first understand what he is to do. This may involve auditory or visual skills, or it may involve a combination of both. In any case, the child needs sufficient auditory and visual development to proceed beyond the set of directions.

Second, following the comprehension of the directions, the child must respond to a set of questions or tasks in order to express his ability to function on the test. On most of our present standardized tests such response is written and the child must be able to grasp and guide a pencil in the production of the proper response. In the case

of a required verbal response, he must have sufficient language development and background to produce and communicate a response.

Imagine for a moment a child whose eyes do not focus properly, or a child whose auditory skills are inadequately developed, and imagine how he might approach a test which requires a high level of visual or auditory skills in order to perform adequately. Or worse, imagine a child experiencing a disorder or dysfunction of motor movements about to take a test and he is cautioned that there is a time limit of twenty minutes on the test. How might his performance be affected and how, in turn, might his performance affect the outcome of the test? Just what does his test score reflect?

Factors Related to the Test

In addition to the usual rhetorical questions one must ask about the statistics of a test, it is important in the interpretation of the results that the teacher understand what a test is and what a test is not; what a test does and what it can not do.

At best a test is an evaluation of a sample of skills or behaviors. No test can adequately or accurately measure all skills and behaviors in even one area. One then should expect a test to be fallible in that it samples a given behavior at a particular time and at a particular stage of a child's development. Therefore, it is possible and probable that a child might have strengths which could compensate for the weaknesses indicated by the test, but that the test would not so indicate.

Another consideration concerning the nature of the test, and a consideration often overlooked, is whether or not the test is culturally

fair. We have by now, I hope, become reconciled to the fact that no test can be "culture free" since everyone must develop within the framework of some culture, but rather, we should consider the cultural basis for the test and determine whether or not it can adequately and fairly evaluate individuals from different cultures. Assessing the cultural fairness, or lack of cultural bias, of a test is becoming increasingly important since many children who enter school are, to some degree, alienated from the cultural mainstream of the nation. Many, though native born, do not even speak standard American English.

A final factor relating to the test that we should consider in this brief discussion concerns the testing environment created by the test.

Mentally examine for a moment a reading test you currently use and consider the following questions: (1) How closely does the test approximate the day-to-day reading situations required of the children? If the test environment is not reasonably close to the regular routine and environment of the classroom, then this must be considered in the interpretation of the test results. (2) How realistic are the time limits? And (3) are the test materials reasonably similar to the kinds of materials read by the children in class? Not every story requires the child to respond to a multiple choice item. Not every child responds as well to the essay-type question; however, the types of materials and the types of responses required should be considered in the interpretation of the test results.

I cannot answer these questions for you; but they are questions

which you must answer if you are to make a fair and impartial evaluation of each individual child...and no child should receive less.

This brings me to the final area I wish to consider in the interpretation of standardized tests...you.

The Teacher and the Interpretation of Test Scores

While the purpose of testing, according to this paper, is to gain a deeper and better understanding of the child, and while the child is the singularly most important individual in the school milieu, it is the teacher who has the power to regulate the testing situation and to make it a meaningful experience or merely another educational trauma. It seems, then, that the teacher has several important responsibilities.

First, the teacher must control the current impluse to overburden children with tests. He must make decisions concerning the value of the test in providing information necessary to understanding the child. The teacher must decide whether such information as the test can provide is significant and essential and whether or not the same information can be obtained through other and equally valid means.

Second, it is imperative that the teacher know everything possible about each child in the testing situation in order to consider the emotional and intellectual impact of the test upon the child. The teacher must learn more about the child's perception of the test situation.

Third, it is imperative that the teacher be thoroughly familiar with every aspect of the test ranging from the statistics as explained in the manual to an understanding of the test passages and questions.

Only then can the teacher understand what the test is and what it is not.

Finally it is incumbent upon each teacher to interpret to each child the purpose of the test, the reason it is being given, what the test scores mean, and how such scores are to be used.

Summary

In the limited space permitted, I have attempted to outline and briefly discuss some of the factors I believe a teacher must consider in the interpretation of standardized tests. I have mentioned, but not discussed, some of the very familiar criteria which have been used over the years to the exclusion of other important criteria. This paper, however, has focused upon factors which I believe need to be considered. These factors relate to the nature of the child in the test situation; to the nature of the test itself, and factors relating to the nature of the teaching in the test environment.

It is my hope that this paper will serve as a catalyst in bringing about a better understanding of test results and will, perhaps, cast light on other factors which need to be considered in the interpretation of standardized tests.